

Romantic Affinities?: Cavell on Opera, Film, and the Claim of Expression

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I.

In “Opera and the Lease of Voice,” a chapter of *A Pitch of Philosophy* (1994),¹ as in a relatively recent essay entitled “Opera in (and as) Film” (2005),² Cavell develops a compelling argument about the link between these two art forms. According to him, opera and film represent two historically distant attempts to come to terms with the same “cultural trauma,” one he characterizes as “having to do with a crisis of expression, a sense that language as such, reason as such, can no longer be assured of its relation to a world apart from me or to the reality of the passions within me.”³ Such a crisis has a name: it is called skepticism.

It comes as no surprise to those familiar with Cavell’s work, namely with *The Claim of Reason* (1979), and his books on cinema — *The World Viewed* (1971), *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981), *Contesting Tears* (1996), and *Cities of Words* (2005) — that skepticism and the manifold efforts to overcome it are among the major *Leitmotive* of Cavell’s thought.⁴ Likewise, it is well known fact that for him Shakespeare’s (tragic) theatre and Descartes’s (solipsistic) philosophy were crucial manifestations of — and, concomitantly, attempts to appease — the increasingly generalized anxiety, which came of age around the transition between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries,

1. Cavell, “Opera and the Lease of Voice,” in *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 129-169.

2. Cavell, “Opera in (and as) Film,” in William Rothman (ed.), *Cavell on Film* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 305-318.

3. Cavell, “Opera in (and as) Film,” 306.

4. It is the ambition of art (especially of theatre and cinema) and philosophy, from Shakespeare’s later oeuvre to Hollywood’s comedies and melodramas of the thirties and forties, passing through the writings of Emerson and Thoreau, to overcome such a crisis. The opposition to skepticism is actually what brings art and philosophy together, inasmuch as they both suffer from, and try to remedy, the oppressing feeling of incommunicability.

about the actual powers of language and reason to express the intricacies of human experience and to uncover the complexities of the world around. The same applies to opera, which Cavell insists should be understood as both a symptom and an attempt (historically coincident with that of Shakespeare's later comedies, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* in particular) to appease the malady of skepticism. In Cavell's own words, from the "Overture" of *A Pitch of Philosophy*:

[O]pera's issues can be seen to be a response to, hence a continual illumination of, the divisions of self, the suffocation of speech, and the withdrawal of the world that have preoccupied philosophy since the advent of skepticism in Descartes, which is to say, explicitly since the generation after the invention of opera and the construction of the works of Shakespeare.⁵

Alongside philosophy, opera and film have thus at least this point in common: they both respond to that "traumatic crisis of expression,"⁶ which Cavell explicitly construes as a "*historical break in Western history* in which conditions of a catastrophe of human understanding came together, in which, for example, language as such comes to seem incapable of representing the world."⁷ So viewed, the link between opera and film appears to be intrinsically historical — though incapable of being explained in historicist terms (i.e., by tracing lines of causality between socially and historically defined cultural facts). Their affinity instead lies, to follow Cavell, not in the circumstance that they share a set of *unhistorical* qualities as multimedia art forms, but in the fact that they are as it were subterraneously bound to each other as symptomatic responses to the same *historical* drama: the advent of skepticism that marks the dawn of western modernity, with consequences spanning the centuries to follow.

Yet film provides not only a later, but also a qualitatively different, "happier, anyway less fatal"⁸ response, by virtue of which cinema may be seen as both an inheritor and a competitor of opera. Cavell's reading of the scene of Frank Capra's *Mr. Deeds goes to town* (1936), in which the protagonist shows himself unwilling to support opera financially — as his recently deceased uncle used to do — offers a condensed version of

5. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, viii.

6. Cavell, "Opera in (and as) Film," 306.

7. Cavell, "Opera and the Lease of Voice," 139 (my emphasis).

8. *Ibid.*, 135.

his argument regarding the agonistic affinity between the two genres. In this scene, Frank Capra would confess “film’s sense of affinity with opera, often expressed in an impulse of competition with opera.”⁹ Opera, Mr. Deeds seems eager to claim, is admittedly a wrong show to put on. But the reason for this view, with the correlative intimation that film in turn is the right show to put on, is less financially driven, according to Cavell, than one is inclined to think at first sight. At issue in this scene is arguably not “that movies are in some obvious sense economically more viable than operas,”¹⁰ but that Capra allegorizes film’s own “claims to inherit from opera the flame that preserves the human need, on pain of madness of melancholy, for conviction in its expressions of passion.”¹¹

Regardless of the viewpoint taken, it seems indisputable that the way in which Cavell understands the relationship between opera and cinema could not be without consequences to the understanding of their historical unfolding as art forms. In other words, not only is their link historical (in the above-explained sense), but the disclosure of it also prompts a certain understanding of both opera and film that is charged with historically meaningful consequences. In this essay, though I will not remain silent about Cavell’s thoughts on opera, I will mainly focus on film.

To render my purpose as clearly as possible, I permit myself to draw attention to a passage in “Opera and the Lease of Voice,” in which Cavell anticipates the reader’s perplexity and asks: “Why go to film to raise the question of opera? Why not to opera directly?” The reader of this article is much more likely to ask the same question in its inverted sense: *Why go to — Cavell’s view of — opera to raise the question of — and discuss Cavell’s thoughts on — film?* I can answer this question by adding to Cavell’s response that *if* “what happened to opera as an institution is that it transformed itself into film, that film is, or was, our opera,”¹² as Cavell compellingly claims, then an inquiry is worth pursuing into film’s *claim of expression* that seriously takes into account that music is what in opera embodies “the flame that preserves the human need [...] for conviction in its expressions of passion.”¹³ How did film transform, while appropriating, such ethereal flame?

9. Cavell, “Opera in (and as) Film,” 305.

10. *Ibid.*, 306.

11. *Ibid.*, 307.

12. Cavell, “Opera and the Lease of Voice,” 136.

13. Cavell, “Opera in (and as) Film,” 307.

My purpose in this piece, without losing sight of the previous question, is then less to further clarify how Cavell understands cinema in its generality — which is one of the most debated topics in Cavellian scholarship — than to ask how Cavell’s insight into the agonistic affinity between opera and film may be brought to bear on a broader debate on film’s operatic inheritance in relation to the use of music — be it operatic or not — in cinema. This will lead me to a brief appraisal of Terrence Malick’s recent work (especially *The Tree of Life* (2011) and *To the Wonder* (2012)), in which the use of Romantic music is in my view conspicuous enough to deserve critical reflection.

II.

As for opera, Cavell is clear enough regarding the relevance of music as the means through which an overcoming of skepticism, however precarious it might have been, took place: “Nothing less than such a trauma [that of skepticism] could meet the sense of language as requiring as it were a rescue by music.”¹⁴ At the dawn of the seventeenth century, music alone would have been able to reassure the modern subject of her or his ability to convey the intricacies of inner passion or pain. In opera, the human being endowed with language would have regained so to say a voice — one that, while taking hold of her or him, is, and is not, her or his own voice (as if vulnerability to the alienating power of music were the price to pay for the rescue of human communication from the narrow scope of ordinary language).

Historically seen, Cavell’s take on the birth of opera — one that stresses its relevance as an artistic phenomenon that, similarly to film, could not have taken place in any other period of history — seems to be confirmed by the otherwise anodyne fact that the myth of Orpheus haunted the history of opera from its very beginning.

That Monteverdi’s first opera, as well as the two that preceded his initiating masterpiece, and Gluck’s masterpiece a century later, which brings the aria to the musical level of the recitative (a point I accept from Joseph Kerman), all work from the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is almost too good to be true in establishing the myth of

14. Cavell, “Opera in (and as) Film, 306.

opera, of its origins — the story of the power of music, epitomized as the act of singing.¹⁵

Cavell thus reads the myth as a parable of skepticism. When Orpheus looks back at Eurydice — to reassure himself of her presence — that is precisely when he loses her for good. In the myth, music finds itself at the heart of such parable, in which it plays a redemptive role. Nothing can bring Eurydice back, and the feeling of her loss cannot be expressed by words alone. It demands the help of music. In fact, in opera, the rescue of language by music is inextricably linked to the singing voice. Although Eurydice is irremissibly gone, it is as if her spirit survived — so to speak as music — in the moving songs conceived by Orpheus's wounded genius.

But how about film? Where are we to find the antidote against skepticism in the case of the art of moving pictures? What exactly, in cinema, plays the role that music does in opera? What is — put another way — the counterpart of operatic music in film, thanks to which it managed to find a path out of the prison of linguistic/existential finitude? As I previously underlined, my aim is not to elaborate on Cavell's view of film, but rather to discuss the consequences of his insight on the affinity between opera and cinema for questioning the importance of expression in film. So, admitting with Cavell that opera, thanks to the transfigurative power of music, allowed for an overcoming, however precarious it might have been, of skepticism, what does, in that case, play the role — the expressive, anti-skeptic, romantic role — of music in cinema? One might answer this question in a variety of ways. At least three: by means of an analogy, of a metaphor, or else literally.

The first answer consists in stressing that the expressive qualities of moving images are somehow parallel — analogous — to the aural expressiveness of music. This answer decisively emphasizes the visual nature of cinema, the sense that cinema has essentially to do with the power of image. However counterintuitive the equation between the expressiveness of moving images and moving sounds might seem today, the truth is that it lends plausibility to the fact that cinema showed itself fascinated by opera right from the beginning (since the period of silent cinema). Cavell acknowledges precisely this early sense of affinity when he recalls that “[e]ven in the silent era of film, Cecil B. DeMille made a film of *Carmen* as an opera, as if to declare that the expressive

15. Cavell, “Opera and the Lease of Voice,” 139.

powers of silent film are equal to those of music”;¹⁶ or when he points out, as he retrospectively accounts for his interest in the link between opera and film, that “the connection I would go to draw between film and opera was to analogize the camera’s powers of transfiguration to those of music, each providing settings of words and persons that unpredictably take them into a new medium with laws of its own.”¹⁷

The second possible answer — in which one is to resort to a metaphor — is in no way less Cavellian. If anything, it is at the closest to the singularity of his work on film, with its recognizable emphasis on Hollywood’s golden age, especially on a set of movies from the 1930s and 1940s, which Cavell tries to interpret in their specificity by claiming that they form two interrelated genres: the “comedy of remarriage” (see *The Pursuit of Happiness*) and the “melodrama of the unknown woman” (see *Contesting Tears*). In both these genres (or sub-genres), the female character is the trigger for action, and the key to grasp what is at stake in the film. In Cavell’s words:

I have been working out the thought that film — judging from the genres of comedy and of the melodrama whose affinities I have traced elsewhere — is, or was, about the creation of the woman, about her demand for an education, for a voice in her history. In the comedies this happens by way of something there represented as the possibility of marriage; in the melodramas it happens in the rejection of what in them is pictured as the option of marriage.¹⁸

In both cases, what interests Cavell the most — and matters to us here — is, as he puts it in the Introduction to *Contesting Tears*, “the creation of the woman — the new creation of the woman, the creation of the new woman, the new creation of the human.”¹⁹ As if women were, metaphorically put, the privileged protagonists of an universal overcoming of skepticism through film, thus playing the same role as music in opera. Already in opera, women were significantly assigned a crucial — if tragically mortal — role. As Cavell maintains in the wake of Catherine Clément (whose book *L’Opéra ou la défaite des femmes* was translated into English as *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*),

16. Cavell, “Opera in (and as) Film,” 307.

17. Cavell, “Opera and the Lease of Voice,” 137.

18. *Ibid.*, 134.

19. Cavell, *Contesting Tears. The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 5.

they eventually die, so to speak, “because they sing,”²⁰ because men hear in their voice “what they want and want not to hear”²¹ — a situation that Cavell deems parallel to the “self-torment whose shape is skepticism, in which the philosopher wants and wants not to exempt himself from the closet of privacy, wants and wants not to become intelligible, expressive, exposed.”²²

The difference between opera and cinema, as regards the role of the feminine, thus consists in the fact that whereas in opera the flight from the ordinary is without return to the female character, thus prompting the diva to die of her own singing, in film her reinvention — with a more or less happy outcome — succeeds in breaking the chains of inexpressiveness, in aptly transcending the narrow confines of human communication.

The third answer to the question as to where, in film, the source of expression lies (admitting that it lies in music in the case of opera) reads like a tautology. In fact, one could answer that question as simply as to claim that the “equivalent” of operatic music in film is nothing else than the *music composed, adapted, rearranged for, or simply used (quoted) in, film*. In fact, without ever being an isolated element, music is arguably one of the chief means at hand of filmmakers to enhance the expressive power of cinema.

The ways in which music is used in cinema, notably for expressive reasons, have been receiving a great deal of attention in recent years. In addition, it should be mentioned that long before the appearance of film music studies, Adorno and Eisler jointly wrote a pioneering book, *Composing for the Films* (1947), which provides a background for later discussion and raises questions that would be later developed in various directions.²³ I will not go into details about the many aspects of this debate, but note that a recurrent trope in the field consists in isolating Wagner as a key figure to think the interrelation of opera and film through the lens of the use of music in cinema. Scores like those of *Star Wars* or *The Lord of the Rings* are often referred to as Wagnerian on account of the sense grandiose, epic, overwhelming feeling they instill in the viewer/listener. But is this the best interpretation of Adorno’s remark that to think

20. Cavell, “Opera and the Lease of Voice,” 132.

21. Cavell, “Opera and the Lease of Voice,” 132.

22. Ibid.

23. See, for instance, Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard Leppert (eds), *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

of the relationship between opera (especially Wagner's) and film amounts to postulate the "birth of film out of the spirit of music"²⁴? As far as I am concerned, I think that the recognition of the name of "Wagner" on the sole ground of style (as a synonym of Teutonic grandiosity in music) is not only simplistic but also potentially misleading. I'll return to this theme later.

So we have three answers, three ways of grasping, as it were, the essence of the expressive power of cinema: by drawing attention (1) to the homology between the expressive powers of moving image and music, (2) to the embodiment of the claim of expression in women's willingness to change their lives and find their own existential path, (3) to the acknowledgement of music's expressive function in film (similarly to opera). Despite their differences, these answers do not exclude each other. Cavell himself gives an example of their coming together when he characterizes women's existential journey in comedies and melodramas as one having to do with both a change in their appearance as well as with an upheaval in their lives. In this case the *analogy* that equates the expressive powers of moving images with those of music is what lends visibility to the *metaphor* according to which the woman succeeds in overcoming the circumstances that condemn her to inexpressiveness, insofar as her education and self-discovery coincide with her reshaping her own image.

By the same token, Cavell's pronouncements on the use of music in films are rare, at least compared with his analyses of how many movies allude to opera in general, or (quite often and in the most pregnant instances) to one opera in particular. In fact, these later references are not only important to interpret the film as such, but seem to provide an invaluable clue to ponder the subterranean competition between film and opera. This is what happens in *Moonstruck* (1989) and *Meeting Venus* (1991), which Cavell discusses in "Opera in (and as) film" with an eye on their respective references to Puccini's *La Bohème* and Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. According to Cavell, they are paradigmatic of "the category in which a particular opera enters into the substance of a film, where the competition between an opera and the attention given to it in the film becomes an essential part of the film's subject; or to say it otherwise, where to understand the relation between the film and the opera to

24. Theodor W. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 13 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 102.

which it weds itself sets the primary task of the understanding of the film.”²⁵ Be that as it may, the fact remains that the legacy of opera has also made its way into cinema through the use of music.

III.

In keeping with the previous reflections, and to bring this conversation a bit further, it is perhaps timely to turn to Terrence Malick. As the reader is likely to know, Malick graduated in philosophy at Harvard, having been close to Cavell since the sixties as both a student and a friend. Besides this, he apparently faced the dilemma of choosing between the career of a filmmaker and that of a philosopher (he even published a translation of, along with a comment to, Heidegger’s *The Essence of Reason* [*Das Wesens des Grundes*] before starting his studies on cinema more seriously).²⁶ This said, if I bring Malick into discussion here, it is less due to the affinities between him and Cavell that the above-mentioned facts suggest, than because his use of music (mainly of romantic music) in his two most recent films (*The Tree of Life*, and *To the Wonder*) seems to embody — perhaps, I reckon, too literally — the *claim of expression* that Cavell describes in his writings on film.

Thus, if one wonders how the use of music (notably of pre-existing music) may contribute to the strengthening of the expressive power of cinema, and if one is in search of examples, one may easily become persuaded that the quotations of a huge amount of compositions in Malick’s recent films (by J. S. Bach, Haydn, Berlioz, Dvorak, Mussorgsky, Wagner, Tchaikovsky, Mahler, Respighi, Gorecki, Shostakovitch, Rachmaninov, Lupicka, Part, Rataavara, among others) corresponds to a possible actualization of Cavell’s ideas. In these films (as already in *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*), music seems to be at the service of the exteriorization of a certain *Stimmung*, one that Malick finds better captured — if one looks back to the previous list of names — in Romantic music... Like the voice-off — through which the inner thoughts of the characters become audible — music seems to play an incantatory role in a perfect

25. Cavell, “Opera in (and as) Film,” 312.

26. See Thomas Deane Tucker and Stuart Kendall (eds), *Terrence Malick. Film and Philosophy* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

match with breathtaking images of nature and people (running, dancing, fighting, playing...) against the background of natural, rural or urban scenery. Put otherwise, in many of Malick's films, music enhances the expressive power of images in a quite conspicuous way.

This said, the truth is also that the more music contributes to the expressiveness of the film, the more the "intrusive" power of music comes to light — that is, the more it becomes apparent that the expressive and the manipulative aspects of music may eventually overlap. There is a scene in *The Tree of Life* in which Smetana's *The Moldau* is heard for about three minutes. The use of this piece is anything but arbitrary. In fact, the musical depiction of the course of the river — sometimes serene, other times turbulent — seems to offer a parable of the course of life, driven — as the film itself intimates — by the conflicting forces of "nature" and "grace." The symbiosis of image and sound, for the sake of expressiveness, finds in this scene a paradigmatic example. By the same token, all this seems to be at the service of a certain worldview. Incidentally, one that not only hangs on the dichotomy between nature and grace, but that also suggests that redemption lies in choosing the path of grace, of acceptance, of spirituality.

These remarks lead me to one last hypothesis: that what Wagner is blamed for — a certain totalization of artistic means, aimed at producing an overwhelming impact over the spectator that will ultimately get him/her to adhere to a certain worldview — is not without similarities with what Malick tries to achieve in using music the way he does in these films. This hypothesis prompts a lot of questions, not the least of which is whether Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* actually represents a totalizing, authoritarian, or proto-fascist (as Lacoue-Labarthe suggested)²⁷ moment in the history of opera. A case can be made that in Wagner's work the heterogeneous, the unsubsumable, and the undecidable play a much more crucial role (as Badiou claimed)²⁸ than is often admitted. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the strengthening of the expressive power of one art — leading, in the limit, to the attempt to convey the complexity of human experience as such — tends to go hand in hand with the attempt to articulate as closely as possible its different components (the aural, the visual, the linguistic, and so forth).

27. See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica ficta. Figures de Wagner* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1991). English-language edition, *Musica Ficta: Figures of Wagner*, trans. Felicia McCarren (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994).

28. See Alain Badiou, *Cinq leçons sur le "cas" Wagner* (Paris: Nous, 2010). English-language edition, *Five Lessons on Wagner*, trans. Susan Spitzer (London and New York: Verso, 2010).

It is precisely this insight that might make us further investigate the political stakes and consequences of assuming that expression – thanks to which art would take hold of the spectator, the viewer, the listener – is what art is all about. Cavell, to be totally fair, insists less on the normative weight of such a claim of expression than on its usefulness as a descriptive tool (in the face of the unfolding of the arts and particularly the affinity between opera and cinema). As for Malick, one might probably say that he often appears to be more Cavellian than Cavell himself. In fact, a certain quest for expressiveness seems to have dictated the most intimate law of his films.

In the meantime, drawing on Cavell's emphasis on the expressive core of the arts, we are left with an unattended parallel between Wagner and Malick, with what I suggest could be seen as a romantic affinity: the will to bring to the limit the expressive power of a medium in order to endow that medium with the capacity to give visual, aural, intelligible shape to both the inner and outer sides of human experience. In this regard, rather than taking sides or providing answers, I allow myself to include me among those who are still in doubt, still in search of a better understanding of the promises and deeds of music in both opera and cinema, still willing to bring further the conversation about the joys, the challenges, and the ruses of artistic expression.